

...of 1933. Subsequently, the Monist movement was suppressed. Many of its leaders were scientists and popular writers about science; many were pacifists. Their principal goal was democratic government, with land reform and educational improvement close behind. Yet, by a sad paradox, these high-minded reformers helped the National Socialists win popular acceptance for the idea of racial superiority and for the hideous techniques the Nazis employed to "cleanse" the nation of Jews.

The 1850's, when the Monist movement was born, was a depressing time for liberals. After granting token concessions to public realivness, the monarchists had climbed back on top and were fully in control. Social reform seemed a dead cause.

But when, in 1856, Darwin's *Origin of Species* appeared, liberal scientists were quick to translate evolution into social terms. Not only was nature itself being constantly improved by natural selection, they argued, but so were nations and governments. Just as evolution in nature was inevitable, so no force could withstand evolution toward higher forms in society.

To hasten the evolutionary process, the Monists argued for international competition in cultural terms: not war, but intellectual achievement, would bring the fittest to the top. And to make sure that Germany won that summit, the Monists advised planned, deliberate improvement in the quality of the populace.

One means was eugenics. In addition to advocating selective breeding, the Monists established communes whose members were selected for intelligence and their genetic connection with science; if a candidate were not a scientist, he or she had to have an in the family.

Another idea was euthanasia—advocated, of course, on the highest humanitarian grounds. Even so, the suggestion would probably have been rejected by the German people were it not for the eminence of the Monist leaders and their skill as propagandists. Co-founder Ernst Haeckel, an internationally recognized zoologist, wrote one of pre-1914 Europe's best best-sellers (*The Riddle of the Universe*), and Wilhelm Ostwald, who became prominent in the movement about 1911, had won a Nobel Prize for chemistry.

The Monists' program had no racial overtones. They regarded German Jews as Germans, compatriots in the global intellectual competition. Through their support for internationalism and pacifism, they had strong ties to the German political Left.

But through their advocacy of eugenics and euthanasia, they conferred respectability on two key ideas of the German Right—particularly among the book-reading, middle-class public from whom the Nazis derived so much electoral support.

The Monists, according to Holt, provide us with a cautionary object-lesson "in simplistically applying science as a poultice for human ills, without considering . . . the unscientific nature of human reactions in society and politics." The tale hits close to home: Germany may have been the first nation to cloak barbarism in scientific terms, but it assuredly was not the last. ■

Legitimizing the Nazis

After the initial shock of learning about Buchenwald and Dachau and the others wore off, many of us wondered how human beings could behave as some had—particularly the Germans, possessors of one of the oldest cultural, humanistic, and Christian traditions in Europe. Dr. Niles Holt of Illinois State University in Normal may have part of the answer in his research on the Monist movement, which flourished in Germany

from 1871 to 1933.

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